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Quince Productions Offers Two LGBT Plays *Passing By* and *Show/Tell* explores gay relationships.

By J. Cooper Robb

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A gay old time: John Jarboe (left) gets cozy with Matt Taylor in *Passing By*. Photo by Jon Donges

Philadelphia theaters tend to fall into two categories: the larger companies that present broader, more universal fare, and the small and midsize troupes that seek out a particular niche. But even in a performing arts community as large as Philly's there's long been a shortage of theater that specifically explores the lives of gays and lesbians.

This spring, however, there a number of productions focusing on the queer experience, including **Quince Productions'** staging of Martin Sherman's romantic comedy *Passing By*. Set in 1972 and first produced in 1974, *Passing By* is a reminder of what many gay relationships were like in the decade between the Stonewall riots and the AIDS epidemic.

Akin to a gay version of Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*, the play focuses on Toby (Matt Taylor) and Simon (John Jarboe). Toby is a struggling artist (is there any other kind?) who's prone to illness and injury (he tells Simon he gets whiplash making love). Simon is an athletically gifted diver. To Toby, the body is a constantly malfunctioning machine. To Simon, it's a temple to be worshipped.

Simon has come to New York searching for work as a sportscaster, and he's the proverbial fish out of water. What he shares with Toby is a fondness for French films and for his body (and it is an impressive body).

The plot is simple and smoothly rendered. The young, hunky and idealistic Simon and the clumsy, practical and middle-aged Toby meet in a movie theater and share a single night of intimacy. Eventually the two strike up a more lasting relationship centered on a shared illness, which in this happily dated play isn't HIV, but hepatitis. The guys spend most of the second act in bed complaining, but eventually commiserate and bond.

Director Richard Rubin's production is amiable, though the play's conclusion may seem unsatisfying to theatergoers accustomed to civil unions and gay marriage. In *Passing By* even a public display of affection between two men is fraught with peril: "I'd kiss you but we'd be arrested," Toby says to Simon as they look at each other longingly on a Manhattan street.

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Passing By is not nearly as compelling as Sherman's Holocaust drama *Bent* or as flamboyant as his libretto for the musical *The Boy From Oz*, but Jarboe's and Taylor's performances are charming and the play's old-fashioned sensibility is sweetly nostalgic.

Walnut Street Theatre Philadelphia, Walnut St Theater show tickets. WalnutSt.EventTicketsCenter.com



A far more edgy and contemporary tone is found in Quince's late-night staging of Victor Bumbalo's *Show/Tell*, which follows *Passing By* on Friday and Saturday nights.

Two nominally related one-acts, *Show/Tell* focuses on gay men in institutions.

The show starts with a bang as we watch a priest (Michael Tomasetti) performing fellatio on a young worker (Peter Roccaforte) in a mental institution. The priest has been incarcerated for revealing a lesion on his body to a group of shocked parishioners. Tomasetti gives a capable performance, but the topic of a priest questioning his church and faith makes Bumbalo's short one-act feel like an inferior version of John Patrick Shanley's 2005 Pulitzer Prize-winner *Doubt*.

Passing By
Wed., April 29, 8pm.
Through Sun., May 3.
\$16-\$25. (Sunday performance benefits AIDS Fund Philadelphia.)

Show/Tell
Fri., May 1 and Sat., May 2,
10:15pm.
\$15.
Shubin Theatre, 407 Bainbridge St.
215.627.1088.
quinceproductions.com

Tell is far more interesting. An ailing man (Peter Danzig) in a hospital quietly listens to his visitor (Matthew J. McDonough) tell a particularly steamy tale about a sexual encounter with a young man. Bumbalo's script has a wonderful musical quality and Danzig and McDonough's strong performances are well-tuned to the play's elegant rhythms. Nicole Mesiano is delightful as a rigid but compassionate nurse and Rubin handles the play's dreamy pace nicely.

The major drawback to Quince's evening of plays is the small stage at the tiny Shubin Theatre. Rubin navigates the space well with his spare staging of *Show*, but both *Passing By* and *Tell* appear cluttered and claustrophobic. Staging concerns aside, though, Quince's productions are a welcome alternative for theater-goers tired of the usual straight fare.



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